Allison DeVaney

W500-Stephen Fox

Writer’s Statement

**Writer’s Statement**

My purpose in writing this narrative paper is to explore some of the key reasons I enjoy writing and how I connect my experiences with the written word. This particular narrative was written as an emotional response to adversity and to showcase that life isn’t meant to be perfect. Life is about how we transcend our obstacles and learn from tragedy so that in the end we can triumph as human beings. Writing helped me find a place inside of myself that I could go to and express my emotions in a positive way. I often travel to this place and it still provides me with a great deal of satisfaction in the typhoon that my life can resemble at times. My audience is simply anyone who has made a life-changing mistake or knows someone who has. I would imagine that my audience is as wide and varied as the ocean itself. I don’t know if there is anyone I would exclude in my audience because my story is truly about the human condition, and while it may not interest everyone, it certainly can be applied to many different life situations.

At first, when I started the time-line for this assignment, I was leaning towards a juvenile experience in the library reading “Raggedy Ann and Andy” books and how this book series led me to write about my own adventures. Yet, when I added all of the events that spurred me to write letters or articles, I found that my writing really became a personal tool when my brother was in his car accident. This event caused me to shift gears and change my initial focus on “Raggedy Ann and Andy” to a more serious topic. My first draft was written in the first person, but it was not in a narrative format. The draft recounted my experience and told what happened, but it lacked in story telling quality. Also, my point was very explicitly laid out on the page. In this first draft, I also tried to run a parallel between apartheid and my brother’s accident by weaving these two events together, but I felt the draft lacked focus because of this. Both of these topics really changed me as a writer and because of this I was having trouble choosing one over the other.

I am stuck in the 5 paragraph essay format and lack confidence as a creative story teller. Writing this narrative was difficult for me. I am so used to grading outlines where the thesis is stated at the beginning of the paper that I am wondering if my paper has a cohesive focus or if I ramble through the assignment randomly. I took two events and wove them together because they truly became one for me, and I am wondering if this strays from the original criteria you gave us? I stated the significance of my experience very explicitly in my conclusion. Do you have any suggestions of how I can make it not so explicit? I struggle with making my words more visual and creating a picture for the reader. Do you think I did this adequately in my paper? How can I improve this skill?

Shine a Little Light on Me

The spring of 1990 was going well. My draft for an article on Namibia’s freedom from apartheid for the school’s alternative newspaper was due on Monday and I was hard at work. I had focus and direction and this was exhilarating. School didn’t come easy to me and academic success was a hard earned achievement. I took a long and circuitous route to my major and I was reveling in all the new and exciting information I was learning. Writing articles for this quirky, independent weekly campus newspaper gave me a great feeling of accomplishment. As I was putting the finishing touches on my apartheid article, Nelson Mandela’s strong and lyrical voice was reverberating through my mind and I was so preoccupied that I almost didn’t hear the telephone ringing. It was 2:00 a.m. in the morning on Saturday, and I thought about not answering it, but it just wouldn’t stop ringing.

There was irritation in my voice when I picked up the receiver and nastily said, “Hello?!” I figured it was a wrong number or someone drunk dialing. I would berate myself for hours afterwards. On the other end was my father’s hesitant voice, “Allison, I have some bad news. Your brother has been in a car accident and they are taking him to The Harbor/UCLA trauma hospital. I need you to come get me because he was driving my car.” I blurted, “Is he OK? What did they tell you?” My father sighed, “They told me very little, only that he was fleeing from the police.” I heard his words, but they didn’t register. I found myself praying that my brother was sober. I didn’t want to ask, but I needed to know. “Dad, was he drinking?” My father sighed and in that moment I realized we were starting a new chapter in our family nightmare. Even though my father, brother and I moved to California for a fresh start after my parent’s divorce, it became abundantly clear that the pain we tried to leave behind traveled well with us coast to coast.

The emergency room was chaotic and after checking in we were approached by two policemen. One of the officers soberly explained to us that there were three boys in the car. His accusatory gaze and curt manner was as disconcerting as the news he served us. One boy, my brother’s best friend, had died shortly after the crash. One boy nearly lost his life and was undergoing a blood transfusion as we spoke. The driver, my brother, was saved by the Jaws of Life after the car hit a parked car and virtually collapsed in on itself. My brother was under the influence of alcohol and made a decision to flee from the police when the lights went on. My brother was alive and his injuries were minor compared to his friends. My father slumped down in a chair and silently wept as much for the guilt he would carry with him for years to come, but also for the relief that came from knowing his son was not dead.

When the dust settled and Richard’s court date was approaching, his attorney asked me to write a letter in his behalf. Not just a simple letter, but a letter explaining why Richard had such difficulty showing remorse for his actions. “Your brother has no emotional ties with anyone,” he stated. “He comes across like a zombie and he is going to get a maximum sentence because he will not talk about what happened.” Shocked at his ridiculous accusation, I immediately came to my brother’s defense, “You have no idea what my brother has been through, because this is truly tearing him up.”

I immediately recognized how empty a rebuttal this was. Memories were clicking through my head like a slideshow. How do I explain his addiction to Ritalin and the constant physical and emotional abuse he experienced on a daily basis? My mother delivered harsh punishments and on top of this was the constant reminder that my brother was “a dirty little bastard” and the daily affirmations of his uselessness just became a self-fulfilling prophecy. How do I explain to someone that my brother just gave into the negativity? Apathy was easier than fighting a constant battle. My mother won, my brother lost, and this is when self medicating became easier than fighting a situation he was not well equipped to win. He simply became what he was molded to be from the moment he was given up at birth and adopted by a parent who didn’t want someone else’s child; an afterthought. I was exhausted with the realization that exposing his pain would also open the door to mine and this was one battle I didn’t want to open fire on. I shrugged my shoulders and said, “His pain is real, he just hides it well.” I immediately knew this was a sorry answer, but I wasn’t willing to open the flood-gate that would let in years of debilitating pain. Of course, the attorney’s all too cynical response was, “Well then, you will need to find his voice and speak for him.”

Here I was an emotional train wreck and the last thing I felt I could accomplish was writing a letter for my brother. I was irritated that I fancied myself a writer, yet immediately balked at the attorney’s request. I could write an article denouncing apartheid, civil and human abuse; yet I couldn’t even begin to get my head around writing a letter to plea for understanding on my brother’s behalf. I was disgusted with myself. Thankfully, Mandela’s righteous words began to flit around in my head, like tiny little synapses of positive energy. “There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.” I got busy.

My father and I spent many hours discussing my brother and his childhood. I looked at the path my brother had taken. His pain, was my pain, we just handled it differently. I stood up to adversity and transcended my obstacles with tools like writing; while he took his pain and masked it with alcohol. Describing to the judge in detail my brother’s journey to adulthood became a powerful prompt for me to explore my life, my relationship with my brother and our relationship with our parents. All of this information helped to build my brother’s life on the written page and explain why he had difficulty sharing his emotions. This also allowed me to “work through” the depth of my grief and anger to treat the situation more clinically, rather than just getting lost in emotional blubber.

In the end, I wrote an informative letter to the judge thoughtfully requesting rehabilitation and counseling for my brother. It was clear my brother was going to jail. It was just a matter of how long and what kind of facility. My brother was sentenced to almost 5 years in a California state prison. He didn’t get the maximum sentence, but he didn’t get the minimum either. He did his time in a low security annex that allowed him to work outdoors, meet regularly with a counselor and complete projects that helped boost his self confidence. I’d like to think that the judge recognized my brother’s need for rehabilitation after learning about his childhood and family situation. We will never know, but the process of writing, drafting, re-writing and putting my thoughts and ideas on paper was as cathartic as it was enlightening for me. Words, ideas, connections and reflection helped me to create a positive environment for my emotions. So much was lost in that accident and even though my brother walked away from it, a large piece of him did not. However, in writing about him, I was able to capture the free-spirited, lovely little boy he was growing up and this is something that I carry with me everywhere I go.